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ABSTRACT

Presented with the task of tracing a bidirectional path which connects the discipline of communication with another social science discipline, there is little difficulty in tracing extradisciplinary influences to communication, but the same cannot be said for the tracing of communication influences to another discipline. Many scholars have documented the uni-directional flow of information and findings into, but not out of, the field of communication. The field of communication has been multidisciplinary from the beginning. Social psychology is one discipline that offers many points of intersection with communication concerning identity and intergroup relations. Social psychology is the branch of psychology where group processes and individual processes come together, particularly the relationships between self/personality/identity and group interaction. SIT (Social Identity Theory), URT (Uncertainty Reduction Theory) and CAT (Communication Accommodation Theory) are 3 social psychological theories that have had a significant influence on the study of communication. In turn, the work of communication scholars on CAT has contributed to issues of identity in a manner applicable to social psychology. There are still other proposed communication theories that may yet have influence. CAT has led the way to a more reciprocal flow of influence between communication and social psychology in the area where identity and intergroup interaction intersect. (Contains 45 references and 5 notes.) (TB)

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Communication Theory and Identity: From Social Psychological Roots to the Bearing of Fruit in Communication Pedagogy and Research

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Presented with the task of tracing a bidirectional path which connects the discipline of communication with another social science discipline, I anticipated little difficulty in tracing extradisciplinary influences to communication. However, I surmised that the tracing of communication influences to another discipline would be difficult. I made this assumption because conventional wisdom, as does any cursory survey of literature in communication and other social science disciplines, suggests that while extradisciplinary influence within the field is pervasive, communication's influence on other disciplines is relatively limited.

Extradisciplinary Influence on Communication

Examination of James R. Beniger's (1990) Communication Research article, entitled, "Who Are the Most Important Theorists of Communication," (based upon review of the International Encyclopedia of Communications), reveals that of the one hundred, twenty (120) theorists listed, "communication" was listed as the field of only three (3) "important theorists" (pp. 708-710). Even if we were to extend our conceptualization of "field of communication" to include rhetoric, linguistics, film, and literature (since at one time or another communication has been intricately linked to each of these areas), the total would rise to twenty-five (25). Although one might question Beniger's methodology, regardless of our conceptualization, math, or methodology, the conclusion remains that communication, as a discipline, is vastly influenced by other disciplines.[1]

Other indications that the flow of influence between communication and other disciplines has been relatively uni-directional and inward comes from other scholars who have sought to establish ties between communication and other disciplines. Looking toward anthropology, Hymes (1967) notes, "It is fair to say that the term "communication" has been peripheral so far as the technical or analytical usage of American anthropology is concerned," and, "That the term can

be used and not used so lightly is one indication of lack of technical status" (p. 2). Regarding sociological ties, Duncan (1967) contends that "American sociologists simply do not believe that how we communicate determines how we relate as social beings" (p. 237), and, "To ask not who *got* what, but who *expressed* what, why, when, where, and how, would be considered an idle question by most American sociologists" (p. 238). A look at psychology, too, according to McLeod (1967), indicates that similar sentiments have been voiced regarding communication's influence on that discipline:

> If...we confine our definition [of communication] to materials listed in the subject indexes of prominent introductory psychology textbooks, we are led to the conclusion that psychologists generally do not see communication as an important focus of interest. References to communication are rare; although there has been a gradual increase in the frequency of citation in recent years (pp. 202-203).

Although these sentiments were echoed in a compilation of texts that is quite dated, they reflect a general sentiment which maintains that the influence of communication, as a discipline, on other disciplines is minimal at best. Current scholars have offered reasons why this state of affairs appears to exist (e.g., Berger, 1991).

Considering the above, I was pessimistic about attempting to trace communication's influences on another discipline. However, I felt no such trepidation about the other portion of my task, that of tracing the influences of another discipline on the communication discipline.

Why Social Psychology, Identity and Intergroup?

As indicated above, there is no minimalizing the influence of other disciplines on communication. Several communication scholars have documented the multidisciplinary roots of communication as a discipline (e.g., Fisher, 1978; Gudykunst, 1983; Littlejohn, 1982), and others

have suggested that communication phenomena is inherently multidisciplinary (e.g., Budd & Ruben, 1972). Despite the multidisciplinary influence on our field, and the potential difficulty such diversity might present to one having to choose a specific discipline with which to link communication, my area of interest made such a choice an easy one.

As a member of a social group (individuals of African descent) historically at odds with the group that controls a majority of the resources (economic, political, and social) in the United States (individuals of European descent), I have a personal interest in intergroup relations. In addition, often being perceived, and understandably so, as an African American, though I do not identify myself as such, I have reason to be interested in issues of identity. Finally, armed with the firm beliefs that communication is "the currency of life," that with such currency we "buy" our identities, and that those identities govern how we "spend" this currency, I naturally turned to a discipline which, when combined with communication, offers points of intersection among communication, identity and intergroup relations.

My review of communication literature which investigates identity and intergroup relations issues clearly pointed to the discipline, more accurately termed a subdiscipline of psychology, of social psychology, as the most appropriate discipline to fulfill the requirements of this assignment.[2] For example, Berger and Calabrese (1975), in presenting their theoretical perspective on initial interactions which later became uncertainty reduction theory, a mainstay of intercultural communication research for much of the 1980s and into the 1990s, noted that communication researchers up to that point "tended to employ social psychological theories as starting points" (p. 99). Social psychology is also the branch of psychology where group

processes and individual processes come together, particularly the relationships between self/personality/identity and group interaction.

Communication, Identity and Intergroup

In recent years, the concept "identity," a perennial fixture in philosophy and psychology, has become central to certain areas of communication theory and research, as evidenced by the many identity-related themes addressed in the work of communication scholars (Carbaugh, 1990; Collier & Thomas, 1988; Coupland, Coupland, & Giles, 1991; Fitzgerald, 1993; Hecht, 1993; Shotter, & Gergen, 1989; Ting-Toomey, 1989). Further analysis of work to which the concept of identity is central reveals that the primary subject matter or context of such work is intercultural and interethnic communication, henceforth referred to as "intergroup communication"[3] (Giles & Johnson, 1986, 1987; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988; Gudykunst & Kim, 1992; Hecht, Collier & Ribeau, 1993; Hecht & Ribeau, 1987, 1991; Hofman, 1985; Kim, 1994).

In addition, this review indicated that one particular social psychological theory has had more impact than any other in this area of study. Henry Tajfel's (1974) social identity theory (SIT) has served as a cornerstone of the study of intergroup communication. Several communication scholars have utilized SIT in theory and/or research (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992; Gudykunst, Nishida, & Morisaki, 1991; Hecht & Ribeau, 1984; Hecht, et al., 1993; Kim, 1994). Two prominent communication theories which treat intergroup communication and incorporate the principles of SIT are, Gudykunst's (1985) uncertainty reduction theory (URT)[4], and Giles and his associates' (Giles, et al., 1987; Coupland & Giles, 1988) communication accommodation theory (CAT).[5]

Premises of SIT, URT, CAT

Although time and scope limitations preclude a full description of SIT, URT, and CAT, it is necessary to provide at least a brief view of the tenets of the three theories involved. According to the formulations of Tajfel (1974) and Tajfel and Turner (1986), the basic tenets of SIT include the following: **1)** The notion that individuals strive to achieve a positive self-concept; **2)** that a significant part of individuals' overall identity, or self-concept, is a social identity, which is based upon belonging to distinct social groups; **3)** that individuals will seek memberships in groups that will boost their self-concepts, or will change their own perceptions of groups if unable to leave a group or join alternative groups; and **4)** that group members will attempt to maintain group distinctiveness, which may be accomplished by exaggerating outgroup differences and ingroup similarities.

URT's main premise is that individuals will attempt to utilize communication strategies to reduce uncertainty in initial interactions with strangers (Berger and Calabrese, 1975). Gudykunst (1985) brought URT to the study of intergroup communication, suggesting that it would be a valuable tool for understanding such communication. The rationale for this is that individuals from different groups attempting to communicate are not familiar with each other's communication norms, and therefore, these individuals would be uncertain in interaction. The basic principle of CAT states that individuals seek to reduce interpersonal difference by converging on communication dimensions, making communication elements more similar to each other. In other cases individuals diverge, or attempt to maintain distinctions or differences from each other by maintaining or exaggerating individual or group communication style markers. I

must caution that these brief synopses merely touch on the basic premises as full treatment of these complex theories is not feasible here. Now to briefly examine the influence of SIT on URT and CAT.

Influence of Social Identity Theory

In the ever-continuing extension of URT, Gudykunst and Hammer (1988), and Gudykunst, Sodentani, and Sonoda (1987) utilized SIT precepts to test uncertainty reduction hypotheses in intergroup communication dyads comprised of members of different ethnic groups. Results of both studies supported some of the hypotheses based on SIT principles, and failed to support others. The authors concluded that their findings support SIT. Of importance here is that SIT, rather than URT, premises and propositions were utilized as the foundation for hypothesis-building and testing. Although supposedly a "communication theory," URT appears to have been subordinated to social psychology's SIT in these research efforts.

CAT scholars, also, have utilized SIT concepts and principles in formulating and testing theory. Like URT, CAT incorporated SIT principles because those principles seemed to offer a parsimonious and effective explanation for findings of early studies of accommodation. During these early studies, it became apparent that participants' ethnic identities were a factor in whether or not they converged or diverged (Bourhis & Giles, 1977; Bourhis, Giles, Leyens & Tajfel, 1979). In particular SIT propositions have been used to explain divergence. As put by Giles, et al. (1991),

> To the extent that divergent strategies are probably adopted more often in dyads where the participants derive from different social backgrounds, the incorporation of ideas from Tajfel's theory of intergroup relations and social change...provides an appropriate context in which to consider divergent shifts more generally (p. 27).

As represented above, CAT also seems to utilize SIT principles to explain communication behavior, suggesting that communication is an outcome variable. But as suggested below, Giles and his colleagues have been perhaps the leaders in taking communication back to social psychology, through extending their work on CAT.

Communication's Extradisciplinary Influence

Prior to looking at how CAT has contributed and can continue to contribute to social psychology, I think it fair to note that other communication scholars, noting the unidirectionality of the flow of influence between communication and other disciplines, have tried to formulate theory from communication perspectives which would have multidisciplinary influence. Kim (1994) is one who attempts to provide an integrative theoretical framework for interethnic communication from a communication perspective, but as Clement and Giles (1994) point out, the approach still fails to "promote the significance of a unique communication perspective" (p. 540).

Similar criticism is also leveled by Cronen (1994) who, in response to Kim's article, states,

> "This commentary is a call to Professor Kim and others to stop stirring around in the scrap heaps of other disciplines and explore what the *discipline* of communication has to offer" (p. 552).

In his response, Cronen illustrates that Kim has relied upon extradisciplinary notions to formulate her theoretical framework, and notes that communication itself seems to play a minor role in her formulation.

As suggested earlier, Gudykunst's work with uncertainty reduction also fails to provide a communication centered approach to studying intergroup communication. In URT studies which include SIT principles and constructs, communication is couched in a framework where it is either

an outcome or a tool. From the URT perspective, communication is influenced by levels of intimacy, uncertainty, or interactants' social and personal identities. Or, communication is perceived as a "tool" to reduce anxiety, or to enhance intimacy, etc.

To be fair, the notion of "communication as tool" does imply that communication behavior influences, as well as is influenced by, the cognitive and affective domains mentioned above. However empirical applications of the theory appear to subordinate communication to other phenomena and constructs. An indicator of this relationship is the following title of a journal article: "The *Influence of Social Identity and Intimacy of Relationship on Interethnic Communication*: An Extension of Findings from the United States to Australia and England" (Gudykunst, Forgas, Franklyn-Stokes, Schmidt, & Moylan, 1992; emphasis added).

Is CAT's use of SIT any more reflective of a communication perspective? I would respond affirmatively, for although CAT uses SIT to help explain communication behavior, the interdependent and interactive relationship between communication and identity is highlighted in CAT's treatment of divergence in interaction. Rather than a one-way relationship wherein identity leads to communication, communication is perceived as maintaining and enhancing identity (divergence as a means of emphasizing distinctiveness and group identity); communication is not merely an outcome variable.

In addition, Giles, et al. (1991) contend that although CAT began as a "strictly sociopsychological model," it has grown into "an integrated, interdisciplinary statement of relational processes in communicative interaction" (p. 2). I tend to agree, because as it has grown to encompass a multitude of interdisciplinary subject matters, CAT's applicability to the study of

identity and intergroup communication remains substantial as utilization by scholars with diverse interests and CAT's appearance in social psychological texts would attest.

Examples include Gallois and Callan's (1991) examination of the role of group norms in interethnic communication, in which the researchers viewed Australian verbal and nonverbal norms through CAT lenses. CAT has been used to examine courtroom processes-law (Linell, 1991), doctor-patient interaction-health care (Street, Jr., 1991) and bilingualism-linguistics (Taylor, Simard, & Papineau, 1978; Zuengler, 1991), all from a communication perspective.

Perhaps one of the best illustrations of CAT's influence on social psychology and identity is to be found in the publication Language, Society, and the Elderly: Discourse, Identity and Ageing (Coupland, et al., 1991). In this work, Giles and his associates note that study of the elderly has not been prominent in any discipline, but what study does exist tends to stem from clinical psychological and psycholinguistic traditions. Yet, the contribution of the discipline of communication is acknowledged. They note:

> Still, several important overviews of 'communication and ageing' have appeared. It is, in fact, the...tradition of communication research - for example, the work of the Speech Communication Association's Commission on Communication and Ageing - that has been most conscientious in thematisizing life-span concerns and ageing itself as appropriate and necessary issues for linguistic research (p. 2).

Early in the text, Giles and his co-authors establish the importance of incorporating communication approaches in the study of ageing, and the relevance of their intergroup-based theory in the following quote:

> Socially and socio-psychologically based interpretations of elderly language use are rare. Yet, the *contexts* of communication across age-groups can be demonstrably distinct, even to the extent that we can reasonably regard the generations as culturally distinct groups (p. 6).

This sets the stage for the utilization of CAT as a framework from which to examine elderly identities, and the relationship of those identities to language and communication. The authors employ communication terminology such as "communication networks," "narrative texts," "conversation analysis," and "discourse analysis" in their treatment of the subject matter.

In this work, Coupland, et al. (1991) "focus on a range of discourse strategies that are involved in the management of *age identity* in different interpersonal contexts" (p. 22). They also devote an entire chapter to "discursive dimensions of age identity" in which they discuss topics such as "interpersonal contextualization of identity," and "negotiating personal identity" in interaction (p. 54-74). In this way the authors demonstrate the centrality of communication in identity processes.

Theories with Potential Influence

Although the work utilizing CAT provides support for the contention that communication theory directly contributes to issues of identity in a manner applicable to social psychological scholarship, there are other proposed communication theories that may yet have influence. Hecht's (1993) proposed "communication theory of identity" (CTI) places communication squarely at the center of identity and intergroup studies, and as such presents an opportunity for communication to influence social psychological examination of identity and intergroup behavior.

Hecht (1993) contends that CTI "extends identity beyond individual and societal constructions to consider interaction..." (p. 78). The author discusses "frames" of identity (personal, enacted, relational, and communal), or perspectives from which we may view identity. While the personal and communal frames seem to coincide with the extant social psychological

concepts of personal identity and social identity, respectively, the enacted and relational frames reflect a communication centered approach that is not found in social psychological literature.

Hecht (1993) asserts that these frames "interpenetrate," or are integrally linked as individuals move through various life contexts, and that simultaneous examination of identity from multiple frames might prove insightful. While CAT has laid the foundation, Hecht's proposal for a communication theory of identity paves the road for social psychology to move away from static looks at, and a priori definitions of, identity.

Another proposed theory of identity which is inherently communication centered, and relates to intergroup communication is Cupach and Imahori's (1991) identity management theory (IMT). Similar to Hecht (1993), these scholars characterize identity as interactional. IMT, like CTI, emphasizes the dialectic tensions between personal and relational identities:

> Individuals develop an identity as a consequence of interacting with others. At the same time, ongoing interaction drives the development of a relationship, and relationships profoundly affect the definition of each partner's identity...Thus, the emergent relationship exhibits a dialectic association with the identities of the individual relational participants (p. 3).

Cupach and Imahori (1991) go on to layout the ways in which they see communication and communication strategies influencing identity and identity management in interpersonal and intergroup interaction. The potential impact of CTI and IMT on social psychological investigations of identity appears obvious.

Summary/Conclusion

The above discussion suggests that while social psychology's social identity theory has influenced much of communication scholars's work on intergroup interaction, communication

scholars have begun to utilize communication-centered approaches to reframe identity and intergroup theory and research. Communication accommodation theory has led the way to a more reciprocal flow of influence between communication and social psychology in the area where identity and intergroup interaction intersect.

Other evidence of the increased flow from communication to social psychology include Genessee and Bourhis's (1982) examination of code-switching in cross-cultural communication in the Journal of Language and Social Psychology, Noller and Gallois's (1986) piece on emotional messages in marriage in the British Journal of Social Psychology. More recently formulated communication theories of identity (Hecht, 1993) and identity management (Cupach & Imahori, 1991) emphasize the relational and interactional nature of identity and suggest communication-oriented questions that may inform social psychology's examination of identity and intergroup interaction. It is apparent that social psychologists, too, are beginning to recognize the interactive nature of identities and the centrality of communication in identity processes. For example, Doise (1988) notes that while self-categorizations (group identifications) intervene in social representations, such intervention is "conditioned by communication patterns and interactional characteristics" (p. 107).

Communication scholars have the techniques to identify, and ultimately anticipate such patterns, to ferret out how these patterns emerge, and why, and how they impact the development and maintenance of identity. Communication centered approaches also have the potential to inform social psychological inquiry on identity in intergroup interaction by asking communication-oriented questions. For example, are particular communication styles, or particular

communication strategies enacted to form and maintain identities in intergroup interaction? CAT's conceptualizations of convergence and divergence suggests so. If different strategies can be identified, what happens when different styles and strategies are enacted in interaction? Is uncertainty reduced in such situations?

Communication scholars may also examine whether individuals utilize different identity expression and maintenance strategies for intragroup and intergroup interaction. Do different groups sanction different strategies? Do communication behaviors and/or strategies in intergroup interaction enhance particular aspects of social identity or personal identity, while detracting from one or the other, or both? How is identity influenced by intergroup interaction, and how does such influence affect intragroup communication and intragroup identification?

By conceptualizing identity as relational and interactive, in addition to being a function of perceptions of self, and perceptions of group belonging, scholars might turn their eyes toward examination of how different identity relationships, established in different interaction contexts affect each other. I suggest that a perspective which is communication-centered, where the focus is on the various roles communication may play in the development, expression, and maintenance of identity in general, and social/group identity in particular, is one which promises much insight for identity study in social psychology and other disciplines.

Notes

1. It would be interesting to see how many of Hickson, et al.'s (1993) "100 top-ranked active scholars," as determined by their prolificness, received graduate (or even bachelors) degrees in communication.

2. I think it might be appropriate to note that were I speaking of "approaches" or "perspectives" as opposed to "disciplines," the work of critical theorists on identity politics might be mentioned (e.g., Sampson, 1993).

3. The concepts "culture," "ethnicity," and "race" are ways of categorizing or representing groups of people. As a subject of study, communication between individuals or collectives of individuals who identify themselves, or have been identified, as members of groups, differentiated via these concepts, has been labeled intercultural communication, interethnic communication, and interracial communication respectively. The term "intergroup communication" has been applied previously by Gudykunst (1986) to communication across group boundaries.

4. Although Gudykunst (1986) made an attempt at formulating a theory of intergroup communication, it appears as though that formulation has not taken root within the field, as evidenced by the lack of references to it by communication scholars since that time. In addition, it should be noted that although I have presented URT as Gudykunst's theory, it stemmed from Berger and Calabrese's (1975) exploration of initial interaction.

5. Giles's original work with speech accommodation theory, has matured significantly since its conception in sociolinguistics, and has developed into a full-fledged communication theory, finally named communication accommodation theory in 1987.

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